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ABSTRACT

Without a simple, defined structure for good writing it can be difficult for an individual to be confident of his or her writing ability. The Six-Trait Writing Method, developed by Spandel and Stiggins in 1990 at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NRWEL), outlines how teachers could teach students "specific criteria for writing." The method has been found effective in teaching students not only how to use this criteria to consistently evaluate their own writing, but to improve their own perceptions of their writing skills. The six basic traits of effective writing have been identified as: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Recently, another trait, "presentation," has been added to form the 6+1 traits of writing. This topical bibliography and commentary reviews some research studies on the six traits. The bibliography/commentary finds that the Six-Trait Writing Method is a reliable reference to guide a writer through the demanding task of writing well, as well as improving his/her skills and confidence as a writer. It also finds that the model is an effective tool to assess students' writing and to scaffold students' writing skills in a systematic manner. Lists 4 Internet resources and 9 references. (NKA)

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Introduction

The difference between a well-written work and a poorly written one is often obvious, but it is sometimes difficult to explain why one piece is clearly a better example of good writing (Steineger, 1996, p.1). The skills necessary for writing well are numerous, and without a simple, defined structure for good writing it can be difficult to be confident of your writing ability (Steineger, 1996, p.1). Over the last decade resource persons at NWREL (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory) have taken the lead in articulating important characteristics of good writing in the form of the Six-Trait Writing method. This method, developed by Spandel and Stiggins in 1990, outlines how teachers could teach students "specific criteria for writing" (Spandel, 1997). The Six-Trait Writing method has been found effective in teaching students not only how to use this criteria to consistently evaluate their own writing (James, Abbott, & Greenwood, 2001), but to improve their own perception of their writing skills (Isernhagen & Kozisek, 2000). The six basic traits of effective writing were identified as: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. In recent years another trait, namely, "presentation" has been added to this list of six traits to form the 6+1 Traits of Writing.

Ideas and Content

According to Steineger (1996), ideas and content provide the "heart of the message and the details which make the message vivid and engaging" (p. 6). In order to convey the ideas and content of a text well, the writer should be sure to move from the general to the specific. The main themes of the paper should be able to stand out from the surrounding text. To maintain the reader's attention, the writer should include original ideas that are insightful and bold. Attention to detail is important, but the writer should be careful not to repeat ideas that have already been covered in depth. The quality of the message is dependent upon the writer's ability to build toward the announced objective.

Organization

Steineger (1996) describes organization as "the structure of the piece including a captivating and purposeful lead, strong transitions linking ideas, and a thoughtful conclusion" (p. 7). The ideas in a text should be placed logically. The reader's ability to make important conclusions is dependent upon the order in which the ideas are presented. The flow of the paper should not be interrupted by poorly placed ideas that don't necessarily fit the context of the surrounding ideas.

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The paper should begin with a sound introduction that provides the reader with the information necessary to guide them into an understanding of what they are about to read. Transitions in the paper should clearly demonstrate the relatedness of the ideas that follow one another. The pacing of the paper should not be either too fast or too slow. This requires an attention to the audiences' need for elaboration. After the body of the paper has been written, the writer should conclude the paper with an explanation of its main points and a closure to restate the driving thesis of the paper.

Voice

The voice of a paper refers to the "personal tone and flavor of the piece; the writer's way of connecting to the audience; the sound of a real person talking" (Steineger, 1996, p. 7). Essentially this suggests that the writer should be aware of the specific audience of his or her work and cater to their individual needs by customizing the text. If the text is a narrative, the voice should be honest and should tastefully portray their ideas in a manner suited for the audience. Exposition and persuasion should be a testimony to each writer's commitment to a given topic. Prose should be highlighted by sincerity and passionate language. Also, writers should anticipate arguments or possible questions to their material and be thorough enough to remedy these.

Word Choice

Steineger says that word choice is "rich, colorful, precise language that communicates in a way that moves and enlightens the reader and creates a picture in the reader's mind" (1996, p. 7). While familiar language functionally communicates the writer's ideas, it rarely captivates a reader. Well-written works include specific, accurate, and concise word choices to vividly display the writer's true meanings. To enhance the paper's readability, it is often a good idea to use colorful language. When striking words and phrases are used, the ideas expressed will often be more memorable. Clichés and jargon should be used sparingly but can add effect to the paper. Incorrect word usage is a very damaging mistake. It distracts the reader and damages the credibility of the writer. Another distracting mistake is redundancy. Readers can become bored when they are bogged down with repetitive ideas.

Sentence Fluency

NWREL defines sentence fluency as "the rhythm and flow of word patterns; how a piece sounds when read aloud" (Steineger, 1996, p. 7). The aim of the writer should be to connect their ideas by building to points sentence by sentence. By utilizing meaningful sentence beginnings, the writer will connect the points more clearly. If possible, the writer should consider attempting cadence. The way to do this is to consider both the sounds of the sentence as it is read orally as well as the ideas included.

Sentences should vary in length and in grammatical complexity to avoid blandness. Sentence structure should be strong and varied to express the natural sentence breaks of spoken language. If the writer chooses to include sentence fragments, they should be used sparingly and should simply add style. This will ease the eyes of the reader and help to maintain the reader's attention.

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Conventions

According to Steineger the conventions of writing are "the mechanical correctness of the piece; the spelling, grammar and punctuation" (1996, p. 7). The list of conventions also includes capitalization, usage, and paragraphing. Conventions effectively enhance the readability of a text. This is an important aspect of writing that is extended as a kindness to the writer's audience.

Paragraphing is important to give the eyes of the audience a rest from the continuous flow of sentences. Typically, paragraphs contain four to six sentences and reinforce the organizational structure of a piece. Grammar can be used to contribute to the clarity and style of a work but is essential for ease of reading. Punctuation should be accurate and should easily guide readers through the text. Spelling should be correct as messy spelling often slows the reading process.

Presentation- a trait that has been added to The Six-Trait Writing Method

Presentation refers to the nature of formatting used in presenting a piece of writing and includes guidelines about handwriting, spacing of text, as well as the way in which text and graphics should be integrated to make a seamless whole. While not all teachers choose to incorporate "presentation" guidelines, many like to explicitly teach students to pay attention to the manner in which they present their writing to the reader.

Conclusion

The Six-Trait Writing method is a reliable reference to guide a writer through the demanding task of writing well as well as improving his/her skills and confidence as a writer (Isernhagen & Kozisek, 2000; Kowalewski, Murphy, Starns, 2002;). It includes the essential qualities of good writing and gives suggestions on the techniques of including the key qualities of the six-trait method. This model has also been an effective tool that teachers have used not only to assess student writing (Dunn, 2000) but also, to scaffold student's writing skills in a systematic manner (Kowalewski, Murphy, Starns, 2002).

Internet Resources

*About 6+1 TraitTM Writing: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/about.asp?odelay=1&d=1

*Websites on 6+1 Trait Writing that contain links to multiple resources in this area.
http://www.webenglishteacher.com/6traits.html
http://www.kent.k12.wa.us/curriculum/writing/elem_writing/Bib/6traits.htm

*Rubric for the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing fro 7-12 grades used by the Kent School District
http://www.kent.k12.wa.us/curriculum/writing/sec_writing/writtraits712.htm

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